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ABSTRACT

The public's first expectation is that every child while in school learns to read, write, and compute. Vocational education must deal with this expectation because vocational education, beginning in the elementary grades, must make clear the connection between reading and employment, arithmetic and income, and writing and self-respect. The second expectation is that vocational education must place all young people who do not go on to a 4-year college program on a rung of the employment ladder, including those who learn slowly. The third expectation of the public is that vocational education must respond to a situation in which: (1) High school continues to be the only transition to the world of work for 60 percent of our young people, (2) The number of jobs which the unskilled can fill is rapidly declining, and (3) The number of jobs requiring a liberal arts education is increasing far less rapidly than the number demanding a technical skill. (JK)

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What the Public Expects of Vocational-Technical Education

Remarks of Hugh Calkins
At Dedication of The Center for Vocational and Technical Education,
The Ohio State University, September 4, 1969

In this company of distinguished experts on vocational and technical education, a school board member and chairman of a national advisory council is well advised to talk more about ends than means. Without departing from the solid ground on which a layman can safely tread, I can address myself to the question "What does the public expect of vocational and technical education?"

Our expectations are high.

I.

The first expectation sounds simple enough. It is that every child while in school learn to read, write and compute. It is a measure of how rapidly conditions change. That in the period of ancient history before the Second World War, this expectation would have been considered revolutionary. High schools then enrolled only the same proportion of the population as colleges do today. Most jobs did not require even basic educational skills. Education was something which some people needed, and everybody ought to have, but it was not seen, as it is today, as an essential for the whole population.

Our reach always exceeds our grasp, and while we have universal acceptance today of the proposition that every child must have a workable education, we still fall far short of attaining that objective. In the neighborhoods that make up the inner one-half of the city of Cleveland, it is a fair estimate that this year we will educate--in

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the minimum sense that I am using that word--only about half of the young people. About as many of the seventeen year olds will have dropped out of school as will graduate. Most of those who drop out, and some of those that graduate, will be unable to do arithmetic well enough to be a taxicab driver, and unable to read and write well enough to pass most minimum tests for employment. This is massive educational failure, and the public looks to vocational and technical education to play a major role in overcoming it.

Why, you may ask, does the public expect vocational and technical education to help overcome this problem? The answer is simple enough, and is found in that stubborn problem of human motivation. Most of those who fail to learn to figure, read, and write in our schools, fail because schooling seems to them an exercise in futility. Books which are irrelevant to their interests, classes which are oriented towards further years of schooling after the twelfth grade, mathematics which seems to serve no useful purpose, do not get the attention of boys and girls brought up to solve immediate problems. The elementary grades are where vocational and technical education must begin for many students must begin for all students. There is where the connection between reading and employment, arithmetic and income, writing and self-respect, must be made clear. To the public, these connections are obvious. The public expects that schools will make them obvious to the students also.

II

The second expectation of the public is that vocational-technical education will actually place young people who do not go on to a four-year program in an employment ladder which reflects their skills and

interests. The portion of the public which lives in middle class suburbs has long thought it was a responsibility of their suburban school systems to place their sons and daughters in college. Now the rest of the public is beginning to realize that the responsibility of schools is much broader than that--it is to place all students, either on the next rung of the educational ladder, or on a rung of the employment ladder.

For many years schools have said that employment is not their responsibility, and that it is the job of the employment service to find positions for those who enter the labor force. Now that view is breaking down. Schools are accepting the responsibility for finding jobs for their students. Probably the most successful program introduced by the Cleveland schools in the last five years is the employment service through which we now commit ourselves to the graduates of inner-city high schools that we will find them jobs. What some schools do becomes the expectation for others. Public expectation that schools will find jobs for graduates will soon be a fact of life.

The public does not expect that the schools will train all students in all skills to levels of employability which will require no further training from employers. Many industrial employers, as a matter of fact, are much more interested in basic skills and attitudes from prospective employees, than they are in the specific ability to run their particular machine. The notion that schools "cheat" students by giving them partial preparation for industrial employment is a myth that does not correspond to reality.

What the public expects is basic training for employment for all students. Young people who do not go on to four year colleges need

basic skills--blueprint reading, the use of micrometers, typing, shorthand, some understanding of business machines, some understanding of machine tools, the kinds of attitudes which give an awareness of the work situation. The transferable understanding of electricity is more important than a knowledge of how to repair a particular kind of equipment. Experience on the job, gained through a cooperative program, can be worth much more than hours of skill training in the classroom.

The public, moreover, expects the schools to be patient with those who learn slowly. The tendency of some vocational educators to raise admission standards and exclude from training programs those who need the training most flies squarely in the face of the public's expectations for vocational and technical education. The public does not believe that educational failure is inevitable, any more than the public accepts the idea that the automobile industry needs to manufacture defective cars. The public expects the schools to work with those who need schooling the most, and not to achieve easy statistical success by limiting pre-employment programs to those for whom success comes easily.

III

The third expectation grows out of the fact that the public has much less college education than the educators. The other day on behalf of the National Advisory Council on Vocational-Technical Education I released to the public our first annual report. Let me quote a few paragraphs from it.

ATTITUDE

At the very heart of our problem is a national attitude that says vocational education is designed for somebody else's children. This attitude is shared by businessmen, labor leaders, administrators, teachers, parents, students. We are all guilty. We have promoted the idea that the only good education is an education capped by four years of college. This idea, transmitted by our values, our aspirations and our silent support, is snobbish, undemocratic, and a revelation of why schools fail so many students.

The attitude infects the Federal government, which invests \$14 in the Nation's universities for every \$1 it invests in the Nation's vocational education programs. It infects State governments, which invest far more in universities and colleges than they do for support of skill training for those whose initial preparation for the world of work precedes high school graduation. It infects school districts, which concentrate on college preparatory and general programs in reckless disregard of the fact that for 60 percent of our young people high school is still the only transition to the world of work. It infects students, who make inappropriate choices because they are victims of the national yearning for educational prestige.

The attitude must change. The number of jobs which the unskilled can fill is declining rapidly. The number requiring a liberal arts college education, while growing, is increasing far less rapidly than the number demanding a technical skill. In the 1980's it will still be true that fewer than 20 percent of our job opportunities will require a four-year college degree. In America every child must be educated to his highest potential, and the height of the potential is not measured by the color of the collar. Plumbers, carpenters, and electricians make more than many school superintendents and college presidents; only the arrogant will allow themselves to feel that one is more worthy than the other.

We recommend that the Federal government immediately exercise its leadership and allocate more of its funds to cure our country of our national sin of intellectual snobbery.

IV

Since releasing that statement, my telephone has been ringing as members of the public called to say how much they agree with the thesis that education has other purposes than training for college. I am not, I think, anti-intellectual. It is my privilege to serve close to the heart of one of the world's foremost universities. I believe I appreciate as well as most the contribution which college and graduate study can make to an individual. I welcome the high aspirations which so many young people have and which so many families have for their children.

What I oppose is a lack of balance. I oppose the kind of myopia which says that only a college education is a worthy one. I oppose the blindness that prevents people from seeing the satisfaction which can be derived in a variety of careers. I oppose the impracticality that suggests to so many young people that they do not need to learn competency in something in order to make their way in this world.

It is for this reason that I am particularly pleased to participate in this dedication program. Action speaks much louder than words. The contribution which The Ohio State University is making in the construction of this building demonstrates the reality of the concern of this university for the variety of career choices which make up American society. This university, I am glad to say, is not culture-bound. It perceives the importance of diversity, the importance of skills, the importance of the practical as well as the theoretical. President Fawcett, you and your trustees are to be congratulated for your wisdom and understanding in placing The Ohio State University at the forefront of the nation's commitment to relevant education for all.